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C O N F I D E N T I A L HARARE 001624

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2009
TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [ZI](#) [ZCTU](#)
SUBJECT: AMB DELL MEETS TOP LABOR LEADER

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell for reason 1.5 d

Summary

1. (C) During a September 15 meeting with the Ambassador, Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, (ZCTU) Secretary General Wellington Chibebe said President Mugabe was unlikely to leave office, even in 2008 and that the political opposition would likely lose the parliamentary elections badly, largely because of ZANU-PF,s control of rural areas. ZCTU and other civil society groups therefore needed to adopt a different, longer-term approach to democracy. For its part, ZCTU was attempting to organize agricultural workers as a first step in weakening the ruling party,s hold over the countryside. End Summary.

A Long-Term Approach Needed

2. (C) Chibebe said President Mugabe would be unlikely to leave office, even in 2008 and that the ZCTU and other civil society organizations therefore had to also plan long-term, not just post-2008 but post-Mugabe. He added that Mugabe,s political acumen should not be underestimated. ZANU-PF has a long-term plan and had successfully kept the opposition on the defensive by, among other things, taking the opposition,s ideas and implementing them as their own. In contrast, the opposition lacked a long-term strategy and instead was constantly reacting to ZANU-PF initiatives.

3. (C) Chibebe said that as a key part of their long-term strategy, the ZCTU was starting to organize farm workers in the traditionally ZANU-PF countryside. He claimed early success in reaching farm workers and asserted that his organization,s efforts would eventually loosen ZANU-PF,s grip on rural areas. He claimed ZCTU,s recruiting efforts had the support of local chiefs, despite their traditional ties to the ruling party. The ZCTU was nonetheless proceeding cautiously with its rural efforts to avoid detection and reprisal. In that regard, Chibebe said the GOZ clearly saw the ZCTU as an opponent and was determined to weaken it. Government tactics included infiltrating the union with informers, creating the rival Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU), breaking up labor rallies, and police harassment of labor activists. That said, the GOZ had to tread more lightly on labor leaders than other perceived opponents because of the International Labor Organization,s (ILO) close scrutiny.

4. (C) Chibebe said that another component of the ZCTU,s plan for the future was to concentrate on raising its membership. The ZCTU currently contained 36 unions with a total of 250,000 to 300,000 workers, which represented 25-30 percent of the total formal Zimbabwean work force and workers in parastatal firms still formed the ZCTU,s backbone. However, the union was in the process of organizing some 1.2 million workers in the informal sector, mostly in rural areas. The Ambassador raised the issue of land reform, questioning why no one had challenged ZANU-PF on the failure of its land reform policy. Chibebe agreed the opposition should be more outspoken, noting that ZANU-PF should not be allowed to claim as a success a policy that had hurt four times as many Zimbabweans as it had helped.

Comment

5. (C) Chibebe was confident, articulate and thoughtful. His strategic vision is particularly impressive and it is encouraging that under Chibebe,s leadership the ZCTU is already thinking of ways to counter a likely ZANU-PF victory in the March elections, even as it struggles with the shorter-term political situation. One can,t help but think that, like Morgan Tsvangirai before him, the future leader of the political opposition might well come from the ZCTU.

Dell